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CURRENT LITERATURE.

RECENT GERMAN FICTION.

Upon German fiction of the present it is possible to base something like an approximately correct conception of the character of the German people to-day. For the novelists of Germany are portraitists rather than narrators; they are concerned more with character and the crises which are its touchstone than with the conditions and accidents which culminate in those crises. Since their apprenticeship in the school of French naturalism, the German novelists have learned to combine seriousness of purpose with that lightness of touch which is needed to make a problem palatable to the general reader, and the first eager, rather superficial and often repulsive imitation of Zola, noticeable in the fiction of the century's end, has been supplanted by a more refined and æsthetically satisfactory presentation of the tangible verities of life. History and romance play a very subordinate part in German fiction to-day. The authors prefer to study types of their own time and the plots of their stories depend almost entirely upon the action of men and women, their attitude toward life and their mutual relations. Leaving aside groups of writers whose outlook upon life is narrowed by sociological theories and those that are burdened with some message, religious, patriotic or otherwise, the recent works of German novelists are well-constructed and well-written, of the widest possible range of theme and wholesome in spirit.

The domestic drama, as determined by motives of heredity, marriage or economics, is the foundation upon which the majority of stories is built. The first quite naturally lends itself to speculation and analysis, which at times leads into by-paths of investigation not inviting to the Anglo-Saxon reader, yet though there is a strong tendency among German writers of the present to mix up art and science, there are some who know how to avoid the pitfalls of such

experiments. One of these is Dr. Karl Federn, the Dante scholar and translator of Emerson and Whitman, whose name appears on the title-page of a novel *Die Flamme des Lebens* (S. Fischer & Co., Berlin). The taint of hereditary insanity is the shadow hovering over the hero and heroine, yet the voice of life calls loud to both and they obey the lure. Though the woman escapes by suicide from the fate she fears, the brave struggle of the man gives the story a keynote of faith in the power of human beings to throw off the spell of the unknown forces which seem to have willed their defection. George Hirschfeld, once hailed as a young rival of Hauptmann, has recently turned to fiction and in *Das Mädchen von Lille* (S. Fischer & Co., Berlin), tells the story of a marriage which from the outset seems to lack a secure foundation. The Pre-Raphaelite figure of the invalid heroine with the soul of music is in strange contrast to the robust health and methodical industry of the young historian, characters which are splendidly drawn. Their love is somewhat anæmic; but the tragedy only develops when the daughter of that ill-matched couple grows up, burdened with the sensitiveness of the mother, paled by the atmosphere of the sick-room, a flower from shadow-land which a breath of reality can kill. There is a third woman, companion and governess to the girl, faithful friend and indispensable helpmate to the father, also a fine portrait. The dramatist's hand shows itself in the firm construction of a plot with meager action, and in the well-prepared dramatic climax. The inevitable tragic end is, however, relieved by a suggestion that it is not the author's final word on the subject of the right of the living.

The growth of a child-soul is a theme much favored by the psychological novelists of Germany. Friedrich Huch in his story of *Mao* (S. Fischer & Co., Berlin), alludes to the possibility of a remote ancestral influence shaping the character of his hero. The burden of the story is the painful contrast between the dream-world of an imaginative child and the realities of the workaday world which pass its understanding. The practical, sensible, conventional parents are worried by the undemonstrative, shyly secretive nature of the boy, until his passionate attachment for the portrait of an unknown boy hanging in the old family residence culminates in his untimely end. The story is steeped in an atmosphere of sad mystery and told with an indefinably tender charm. George

Reicke in his new story *Der eigene Ton* (Egon Fleischel & Co., Berlin), also begins with his hero's childhood and traces the development of one of those unfortunate individualities, moved by a strong ambition, but at every start stopping short of success either by a longing for the unattainable or an inability to grasp the tangible values of life. It is a story of poverty and hardship, but parallel with the account of a student's struggle for the material necessities of life runs the narrative of his inner growth, until he attains the maturity of acceptance. The book is full of a sane philosophy, presented in a style of great force with an artistic disposition of lights and shades and just enough humor to relieve its pathos.

The *mésalliance* in the widest meaning of the word furnishes the theme of some splendid stories of society, serious enough in their treatment of certain phases of life to be ranked with the problem novels. In the center of the stage, upon which Rudolf Huch's *Komödianten des Lebens* (Egon Fleischel & Co., Berlin), act their sorrowful farce, is an ill-mated couple: the daughter of impoverished aristocrats, who dreamed of a humble but honorable husband and awoke to find herself the wife of a wealthy, but vulgar and unscrupulous brute. Huch has overcrowded his canvas, yet his types of society in a small industrial town are intensely lifelike, from the guileless professor with his chivalrous devotion to the woman he adores from afar, to the Konsistorial- and the Landrath and other dignitaries of the small community. There are satirical sidelights upon caste spirit, and there is quaint humor, but through it all runs the thread of tragedy. In Hermann Stegemann's story *Die als Opfer fallen* (Egon Fleischel & Co., Berlin), the hero and heroine are quite as fatally mismated. Into an Alsatian town with its peculiar blend of German and French characteristics, he brings an elderly German pedagogue who has married the young daughter of his deceased colleague and treats her as raw material, like the Alsatian boys whom he is to educate into loyal German citizens. The conflict between light-hearted youth with an insatiable and innocent desire for the joy and the beauty of life, and crabbed age, rigid with dry as dust pedantry, leads up to a strong dramatic climax. The local atmosphere, charged with ill-suppressed antagonism between the French and the German citizens, adds to the high tension of the story. A

strong arraignment of the caste spirit is the burden of a novel by Hans von Hoffensthal : *Helene Laasen*, published by the same house.

Another group of society stories takes its cue from the much discussed question of marriage. Karl von Perfall is a severe moralist and a skillful narrator ; he has few equals among German novelists for mastery of the technique of the novel. He is an architect of fine plots, but in the problems which are their foundation he lacks the fine touch of the real artist and the sympathetic understanding of the philosopher. As in former stories of the kind he fascinates in *Um die Familie* (Egon Fleischel & Co., Berlin), by a plot of absorbing interest, but repels by a brusque realism of language, recalling mediaeval satirists. The gift to illumine with a gentle humor the darker sides of life Georg von Ompteda possesses in a remarkable degree. As a portraitist of military types and the nobility of modern Germany, struggling hard to keep its place and defend its standing against the encroachments of finance and industry, he is unparalleled, and the series of novels called 'Eysen' will survive many contemporary works. In his latest book, *Ein Glücksjunge* (Egon Fleischel & Co., Berlin), he refrains from grappling with any serious problem, he does not even draw a complex character or offer an intricate plot, but tells the simple story of a young officer, who gets into many scrapes during his life in the German metropolis, but emerges from them hardly the worse for the experience. He is, what his comrades call him, a lucky dog. It speaks for the literary gift of the author that he succeeds in interesting his readers in the story, which comes like a relief after the many complex characters and situations treated in modern German fiction. He does not even indulge in critical sidelights upon military life, like the Freiherr von Schlicht, whose *Mobil* (Albert Langen, Munich), is a strong presentation of the commercial view of marriage, so lamentably general in the empire. Told without much detail, without any melodramatic episodes, this story brings home the lesson it intends to convey. A society novel approaching in invention and construction of plot the French drama of intrigue is A. Latzko's *Abenteuer des Herrn Cordes* (Egon Fleischel & Co.), a brilliant narrative with less evidence of serious purpose than most German fiction.

Wilhelm Schmidtbonn's novel *Der Heilsbringer* (Egon Fleischel & Co.), is the story of an itinerant prophet-reformer, bent upon helping the needy and the suffering in the large cities. A Quixotic dreamer going about with long hair and sandals and preaching as the panacea for all ills the possession of a small plot of ground, the fruits whereof suffice for food, he suggests a number of prototypes, and the scene where he leads a motley crowd to the emperor and demands a hearing, recalls memories of the Coxey army. But the note of pathos is strong and the tragedy of the hero's mother, who had seen six sons leave her little hut, never to return, is shadowed forth with much sympathy.

Austria, which has always given German letters individualities standing apart from the movements and the schools in Germany proper, has of late produced a group of interesting writers, whose master in technique was Zola and who in spirit follow Rosegger. One of these newcomers is Emil Ertl, whose *Leute vom blauen Gugguckshaus* (L. Staackmann, Leipzig) is a distinct departure from the usual trend and treatment of fiction. This story of Old Vienna in the Napoleonic era with its artizan and middle class types and the industrial milieu, pictured with a Zolaesque minuteness of detail, full of the homely wisdom and the quaint humor of the plain people, is like a series of genre pictures projected upon a large canvas and accompanied by the whirr of the weaver's shuttle flying back and forth in the quiet workshop, while without the cannons of Bonaparte are booming.

From this simple, wholesome story of simple, useful lives it is almost painful to turn to a book, which in the inarticulate obscurity of its psychic sensations and emotional hallucinations reflects the invertebrate decadence of a writer, whose work in two languages and whose striking literary physiognomy have given him an international reputation. Przybyszewski, the Pole with the perfect mastery of German, in the earlier years of Young Germany the very soul of the artist Bohème of Berlin, has after an interval of work in his native language and his native country, sent out another German book *Androgyne* (F. Fontane & Co., Berlin), which is so typical of his morbid pessimism that it deserves notice as a unique literary curiosity,

Clara Viebig, one of the most highly gifted women writers of Germany, treats in her latest story: *Einer Mutter Sohn* (Egon

Fleischel & Co., Berlin) the tragedy of the childless woman with the invincible mother instinct. During a sojourn at Spa her heroine adopts the baby boy of poor peasants ; but as the child grows up in surroundings foreign to his inherited tendencies, she is pained to see him at heart a stranger, who, when gossip reveals to him his descent, reproaches her for having separated him from his kin. The story has two moments of intense suspense, handled with great artistic discretion : the parting of the real mother from the child with her sudden outburst of savage temper, and the scene, where the boy sullenly demands to know the truth about his birth. The characters are clearly outlined and the plot is firmly knit.

A Viennese author, Helene Polidahl, writing under the pseudonym of Hermann Dahl, has followed up her first success, the story of a religious temperament, with a remarkable study of an artist life : *Harald Atterdal* (F. Fontane, Berlin), in which the psychological interest in the hero and the high emotional pitch of the narrative are admirably sustained throughout the book. In the *Kinder der Gasse* (S. Fischer, Berlin) Charlotte Knoeckel has written a powerful story of young people exposed to the dangers and struggling against the poverty of factory life. More interested in the inner life of her people than in their immediate material needs, she has lifted her story to a higher plane than the tenement fiction of the nineties and pleads her cause in a simple, forceful style without maudlin melodrama or partizan proselytism. In the work of a third woman, Orla Holm, the scene is German-Africa. *Pioniere* (F. Fontane, Berlin) is a picture of colonial life, unpretentious in style, a pathetic transcription of a page of real life.

Some volumes of short stories deserve mention. Hugo Salus is a lyric poet of great delicacy of mood and color, which qualities lend a peculiar atmosphere to his stories. The blue window of magic power which is to restore health of mind to the unfortunate heroine of the first story, *Pieta*, is symbolical of the spirit of the book with the title *Das blaue Fenster* (Egon Fleischel & Co., Berlin). Its cool mild light robs even the cruel tragedy of *The Avenger* of its sting and saves the groteskly humorous tale of the mermaid carved on the façade of an old house in Prague from becoming a burlesque. The poetical romanticism of the book is delightfully refreshing. Jacob Wassermann's volume, *Die Schwestern* (S. Fischer, Berlin), is more modern, both in spirit and form. He has chosen to dive

into the depths of souls abnormal, and the tragedy of the three women, who are the heroines of these stories, Donna Juana of Castile, Sara Malcom and Clarisse Mirabel, is unrelieved by a ray of light. The atmosphere is stifling with terror and almost uncanny in its dramatic tension. Ernst von Wolzogen in his *Seltsame Geschichten* (F. Fontane, Berlin) revels in extravagant situations. The story of a mysterious quack is a nightmare of monstrous imagination; that of the curious prophet preaching the gospel of nature and a simple life in a community swayed solely by practical interests and moving in the conventional grooves of propriety, is irresistibly funny.

In the *Bekenntnisse eines jungen Mannes* (Egon Fleischel & Co., Berlin), Selma Erdmann-Jenitzer, dramatist and stage-manager in Bremen, shows a strong grasp of vital problems, which she presents with considerable power, and with a slight inclination towards over-emphasis of their *Tendenz*. Countess Uxkull, on the other hand, whose earlier books were vehicles for her views of certain problems of life, has written a charming volume of poetic tales, *Ins Leben zurück*, (F. Fontane & Co., Berlin), which show her as a mature philosopher and a true artist. There is a strong dramatic element in the three stories, which are told in a language of rare beauty and finish. Lulu von Strauss-Torney's two stories, *Der Hof am Brink*; *Das Meerminneke*, (Egon Fleischel & Co., Berlin), are among the best specimens of the historical novelette recently produced in Germany. The atmosphere of the first, the scene of which is a German village in the Thirty Years' War, is hot with the breath of hatred and hostility and rife with riot and violence of all sorts. The men and women acting this war drama stand out from the historical canvas in bold relief. 'The Meerminneke' is the story of a supposed mermaid, washed ashore in a small Dutch community, where her pale face, black eyes and red hair make her a suspicious creature. Into the pathos of this tale, vividly describing the superstition and the cruelty of a mediaeval mob, the author has woven some strands of grim humor.

AMELIA VON ENDE.
